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# THE WELSH SOCIETY of Philadelphia

An Account of the Early Settlement of the Welsh in Philadelphia and Its Vicinity, and of the Formation and Organization of The Welsh Society

By

Howard Benton Lewis, Esq.,

President of The Welsh Society

Philadelphia

1926

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# THE WELSH SOCIETY of Philadelphia

In Memory of the Early Settlement of the Welsh in Philadelphia and Pennsylvania, and of the Formation and Organization of The Welsh Society

By

Edward Depuy Lewis, M.D.

President of The Welsh Society

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THE history of the Welsh people in and about the city of Philadelphia is largely the history of the city itself.

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The Welsh were among the earliest of the peoples of the Old World who settled in Philadelphia, Chester and Bucks counties. Some of these early settlers preceded William Penn, and when the latter obtained his royal patent, the Welsh were by far the most numerous immigrants who peopled the new province.

In 1681, a group of Welsh people purchased a tract of 30,000 acres adjacent to the city of Philadelphia, thereafter known as the "Welsh Barony," to be paid for, in part, by a quit-rent of one shilling for every 100 acres, payable to the proprietor on every St. David's Day. By the terms of the purchase, the "Barony" was to be a separate realm, wherein all causes, crimes and disputes were to be heard and determined by Welsh officers and tribunals, using the Welsh language. As plotted by Thomas Holme, the surveyor-general, the tract lay on the Schuylkill above the city, three miles north and south along the west bank, thence two miles west, and then parallel to the river for another six miles, and as far west as necessary. It embraced the present Main Line sections of Bala, Cynwyd, Merion, Haverford, Bryn Mawr, St. David's, Berwyn and, running down past Paoli, covered the present site of West Chester.

The "Barony" was the finest stretch of territory contiguous to the city, and, with the later Welsh holdings in the Gwynedd Valley, Penllyn and North

Wales, served greatly in promoting the expansion of the province, and in furnishing Philadelphia with its chief source of food supply.

The impress of so desirable a class of settlers upon the colony, and particularly upon the city of Philadelphia and its surrounding districts, was strong and lasting. Many of these Welsh people were persons of means, education and prominence. David Lloyd was chief justice of the colony. Thomas Lloyd was its deputy governor. Thomas Ellis was register-general. Griffith Jones was mayor of Philadelphia. Hugh Roberts was an affluent owner of land, among his holdings being the present site of George's Hill, which passed by purchase to the George family, who, in 1867, presented it to the city as an addition to Fairmount Park. His son, Edward Roberts, became mayor of Philadelphia and justice of the courts, while another son, Owen Roberts, held the office of high sheriff, and a seat in the common council and in the provincial assembly. There was also the noted Dr. Edward Jones, of Bala, whose wife Mary was the daughter of Dr. Thomas Wynne, physician to Penn. From the same colonial stock also sprang the Cadwallader, Meredith, Wister, Clymer, Meigs, Owen and other old Philadelphia families of the present day. Among the other widely-known persons whose pedigrees may be traced to this original Welsh source were Enoch Lewis, the earliest of American mathematicians; Mary Anderson, the actress; Robert J. Burdette, the humorist; Matthew Stanley Quay and Wayne McVeagh.

Most of these early Welsh settlers were members of the Society of Friends, some were Baptists, and

some were Anglicans, but all were at all times faithful to their own tongue, their own customs, their own memories, and zealous to preserve an interest in the history and traditions of their race. Their intention to form themselves into a social and benevolent society was outlined in the following notice which appeared in the "Pennsylvania Gazette" in its issue of February 25, 1729:

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"We are informed that several Gentlemen and "other Persons of Reputation, of the honorable Stock "of Ancient Bretons, design to erect themselves into a "Society, to meet annually on the first day of March, "or St. David's Day, so-called. In order thereto, on "the first of the next Month, there will be a Sermon "preached in the ancient British language by Dr. Way- "man in this City, and a Psalm set to the Organ; "from thence the Society are to go and partake of a "handsome Collation at the House of Robert Davis, "at the Queen's Head, in King Street."

The next number of the "Pennsylvania Gazette" thus describes the event in question:

"Last Seventh Day, many Gentlemen and "others of the ancient Bretons met and walk'd in "regular order, with Leeks in their Hats, to the Church, "where was preach'd, in the old British language, (as "it is said), an excellent Sermon on the Five first "Verses of the 3rd Chapter of the 2nd Book of Timo- "thy. From thence they return'd, in the like order, "to the Queen's Head, where was a handsome Dinner "prepared, after which the following Healths were "drank, under discharge of Cannon, viz: The King "and Church; Queen Caroline; the Prince and Royal "Family; Prosperity to the ancient Bretons and this "Province; the Proprietor's health, and his Honour, "Governor Gordon's, and many other healths. The "Stewards were Benjamin Morgan, Evan Jones, and

"Edward Pearce, and we hear the following gentlemen "were chosen Stewards for next year: Peter Evans, "Robert Ellis, John Hopkins, and Captain Matthew "Philips. This, it is said, is designed to promote Love "and Friendship, being a Yearly Custom, not only "in several parts of England, but likewise in several of "his Majesty's Colonies in America, and other parts "of the World."

The society's celebration on St. David's Day, 1731, was held at the "Indian King," and the stewards chosen for that year were Rowland Price, Joseph Powell, Samuel Bromage and William Major.

In 1733, an account of the society's annual dinner for that year was given in "The American Weekly Mercury," published by Andrew Bradford, under date of March 7, 1732, as follows:

"Wednesday last being St. David's Day, and the "Birthday of her Majesty, Queen Caroline, the society "of ancient Bretons met at the house of Owen Owens, "at the sign of the Indian King, in Market Street, "from whence they proceeded to Church, where there "was Divine Service suitable to the Day. After "Church, they waited on his Honour, our Governor, "who was pleased to dine with them. After Dinner, "all the Loyal Healths were drank, under the Dis- "charge of Cannon, and the Day concluded with "Musick, Mirth and Friendship. The Stewards "chosen for the year ensuing are Captain Ellis Davis "of Philadelphia, Mr. William Bevan of Philadelphia, "Mr. Thomas James of Chester County, and Mr. "William Thomas of Oxford Township."

That the society continued thereafter regularly to meet on St. David's Day in every year, and regularly maintained its practise of dispensing financial aid to destitute Welsh immigrants, appears from the

papers prepared when the society took steps to have itself incorporated as a body politic. The minutes of the society show that the resolution to incorporate was adopted "at the House of William Ogden, on the first day of March, 1798," and that Clement Biddle, John Thomas and Morgan John Rhees were appointed a committee to prepare a constitution. This committee, in a beautiful and touching preamble to the constitution thus prepared and submitted by them to the society, referred to the long existence of the society and to its long-continued humane and benevolent work, in the following language:

> "Under the influence of these sentiments and impressions, the sons of St. David, in the City of Philadelphia and its vicinity, *have long since instituted a Society* for the humane and benevolent purposes of dispensing advice and assistance to Welshmen in distress.
>
> "*This ancient institution*, so much the pride and honor of its Founders and Supporters, and so much the object of grateful remembrance by the many who have shared in its bounty and assistance; having been accomodated to existing circumstances from time to time, with respect to *form*, is now established by *an act of incorporation*, and presented to the Society in the plan of the following Constitution."

Among the 131 subscribers to the certificate of incorporation were Clement and Thomas Biddle, John and Charles Cadwallader, William and Joseph S. Lewis, Caleb and Owen Foulke, Edward Tilghman, Richard Peters, George Clymer, William Meredith, Robert Morris, Benjamin Chew, Isaac Wayne, John Morgan, John Wharton, Samuel Wetherill, and

others of the most well-connected and influential Welshmen of Philadelphia and its vicinity.

The society was formally incorporated under its present name of "The Welsh Society," on March 30, 1802.

From this historical review of the society's continued existence, in unbroken sequence, from the date of its original meeting and election of its first board of stewards on St. David's Day, March 1, 1729, down to the present day, it will be seen that The Welsh Society is the oldest social and benevolent institution in Philadelphia. It antedates by twenty years the Society of the Sons of St. Andrew, whose date of organization is given as 1749, and by nearly fifty years the Society of the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick, whose date of organization is given as 1771, and the Society of the Sons of St. George, whose date of organization is given as 1772.

All honor to the early Welshmen of 1729 who, in the new land of their adoption, were not forgetful of the land of their fathers! All honor to them that, amid the busy employments of their personal affairs, they were mindful of their Welsh heritage, cherished memories of the customs, habits and tongue of their race, and laid the foundations, in Penn's "faire, greene, country-towne," of a society which should perpetually cement the ties of their common kindred.

Patriotism is said to be a lichen clinging to its own rock. A Welsh-American is none the less a true and loyal American because the heart within him glows at recollections of the little Principality beyond the seas. Were not all Americans, in their

origin, but pilgrims from some foreign strand? What is America itself but the confluence of all the peoples of the world—a vast immigrant-station for all the heterogeneous races of earth?

The Welsh people of America have just cause for pride in the contributions which their race has made to the development of American institutions, American character and American progress. It was a Welshman, Roger Williams of Rhode Island, who first established religious liberty in the United States. It was a Welshman, Thomas Jefferson of Virginia, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, which was signed by eighteen men of Welsh blood. It was a Welshman, Robert Morris of Pennsylvania, who financed the American Revolution, and made possible the victories of Washington. It was Welshmen who founded the great universities of Harvard, Yale, Brown and Phillips-Exeter. Six Welshmen have been Presidents of the United States. The eminent Welsh-American of today, Mr. Charles Evans Hughes, has been both premier of the United States and also a justice of the Supreme Court of the United States, while the present Secretary of Labor for the United States is the distinguished Welshman, Mr. James J. Davis. It is said that there are fourteen millions of foreigners in America, of whom but seven millions have become naturalized. Today, the Welsh lead all nationalities in the proportion of its immigrants who become American citizens, and the impress of this people upon the national life and character, from the fervor of their religious convictions, their regard for the sanctity of the home and family, their love of art, music and literature,

and their unwavering devotion to the ideals for which our American forefathers fought and died, is incalculable.

The Welsh Society of Philadelphia, eldest-born of all societies of a kindred nature, in the city, serves to exemplify, in its membership, all that is best in Welsh character and citizenship. It is the appropriate body for publicly commemorating the great patron saint of Wales. At its annual dinners on March 1st, its members connect themselves, imaginatively, with all that is delectable in Welsh history and romance, and are enabled to make themselves contemporaries with their illustrious ancestors. They renew and refresh themselves in the quaint accents of their mother-tongue, which is the oldest language in the world, save only the Sanskrit and the Persian, and they are beguiled and soothed by the witchery of those plaintive and haunting hymns and melodies which are the treasured possessions of their race. The memories of St. Andrew, St. Patrick or St. George are not recalled in Philadelphia with finer fervor than the members of The Welsh Society annually celebrate the memory of good St. David, who, in the sixth century, founded monasteries and churches, and so enlarged the sway of Christianity that he occupied, in his little mountain-country of Wales, a position scarcely inferior to that of the pope at Rome, and was by a pope of Rome canonized in the twelfth century.

The doors of The Welsh Society are open to all male citizens of Pennsylvania of Welsh descent. There are many residents of Philadelphia and its

vicinity, eligible to membership, who have never enrolled with the society. There are also enrolled members who are not regular in their attendance at the annual dinners.

The Mohammedan, at the call from the minaret, piously turns his face to the East.

Is it too much to hope that, at every recurrence of St. David's Day, the Welshmen of Philadelphia and its vicinity will desire devoutly to foregather at the annual dinner of The Welsh Society, there to vindicate their rich inheritance, and thus to foster, invigorate and expand the historic institution which has been bequeathed to them by their early colonial countrymen, hoary with the antiquity of nearly two hundred years?

"To us, from failing hands, they threw the torch;
Be ours to hold it high!"

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